



# THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

## Edinburgh Research Explorer

### **'The appreciative understanding of good books'**

**Citation for published version:**

Lawrie, A 2015, 'The appreciative understanding of good books': The listener, literary advice and the 1930s reader', *Literature & History*, vol. 24, no. 2, pp. 38-52. <https://doi.org/10.7227/LH.24.2.3>

**Digital Object Identifier (DOI):**

[10.7227/LH.24.2.3](https://doi.org/10.7227/LH.24.2.3)

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Peer reviewed version

**Published In:**

Literature & History

**General rights**

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

**Take down policy**

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact [openaccess@ed.ac.uk](mailto:openaccess@ed.ac.uk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



## **‘The Appreciative Understanding of Good Books’: The *Listener*, Literary Advice and the 1930s Reader**

The BBC’s weekly adult education magazine, the *Listener*, was launched in 1929. This publication was a key constituent in the BBC’s broader programme for cultural enrichment: in its first Director-General John Reith the BBC had hired a man possessed of an Arnoldian faith in the moralising effect of ‘high culture’, and determined to use the wireless as a didactic tool. By 1924 Reith had given Education its own department, and towards the end of its first decade the BBC had made various forays into the field of adult education. The *Listener*, which was comprised mainly of material that had previously been broadcast, was designed to fulfil a twofold pedagogical function: to encourage formal study within existing adult education structures, and to broaden access to cultural information more generally for the non-student. Each issue of the magazine had sections on history, travel, science and literature, but this article will concentrate solely on its books and literature pages in order to explore its attempts to shape the literary taste of its readers – facilitating their navigation through the canon of classic literature, and enhancing their understanding of current developments. Under two dynamic and highly influential literary editors – Janet Adam Smith and J. R. Ackerley – the poetry, literature and books section of the *Listener* became a vibrant cultural space, and a vital educational resource for the 1930s reader. The first part of this article will outline the contentious launch of the new magazine and identify its unique position in the interwar periodical marketplace. Thereafter it will consider the intellectual identity of its putative 1930s readership, before focusing on some of the ways in which the magazine guided and shaped their literary taste by advising on what and also how to read.

The *Listener* was launched in January 1929 amid a storm of protest from newspaper proprietors. Press chiefs were furious at the prospect of competing for advertising revenue with an organisation that was exempt from income tax and already held a monopoly over broadcasting. That the first issue of the magazine was allowed to go ahead at all is testament to the diplomatic handling of this matter by Reith, who brokered a deal whereby the number of advertisements would be kept as low as possible – only enough as were needed to cover costs – and only ten per cent of the magazine’s content would be unrelated to broadcasting.<sup>1</sup> Debra Rae Cohen has usefully identified some of the complexities of the journal’s position regarding BBC broadcasts, yet similarities or otherwise between the original broadcast talks and their printed incarnation in the *Listener* are not entirely relevant to the present argument.<sup>2</sup> What tends to be elided in the admittedly very rare critical discussions of the magazine is that unlike the broadcasts from which much of its content originated, the *Listener* functioned as a

permanent educational resource – a guidebook, or manual, offering information and advice that readers could follow at their own pace. BBC broadcasts were necessarily ephemeral; the *Listener*'s value lay in providing a fixed point of reference, and this rendered the magazine considerably more useful, in educational terms, than the original talks from which most of its content was derived. Senior factions within the BBC administration clearly regarded the *Listener* as fulfilling an important educational function: confidential memos reveal that throughout its first decade the magazine made considerable losses year on year, yet these were deemed justifiable if it allowed the *Listener* to be read by more people.<sup>3</sup>

These readers numbered around the 50,000 mark during the 1930s, which is the period under consideration in this article. My rationale for focusing solely on this first decade is threefold. The period 1929 to 1939 covers the era of R. S. Lambert's editorship, and as I explain below, he was a driving force in adult education circles between the wars, and largely responsible for the magazine's quasi-didactic tone during its first ten years. Moreover, war-related content dominated after 1939 – typical articles covered Anglo-American relations, commentaries from military leaders, planning for after the war, and reports on German propaganda. The literary pages were also drastically reduced after 1939, in part due to paper rationing – sometimes no more than one or two pages of book reviews appeared in each issue after this date. The magazine emerged after the war as a very different publication, with a much larger circulation, and the content perceptibly more focused on politics and current affairs. The magazine's pre-war years, by contrast, were more directly pedagogical: this was the result of its original conception as a 'weekly illustrated educational journal',<sup>4</sup> following the recommendations of the Hadow Committee, which was formed jointly by the BBC and the British Institute of Adult Education in 1928 to explore new opportunities for education through broadcasting. The Committee's guidelines were rather loosely adhered to when the *Listener* was launched the following year; an internal BBC memo records that the choice was between two models – either a deliberately educational journal, or a weekly twopenny magazine more reminiscent of the *Spectator*.<sup>5</sup> The latter option was deemed more suitable by BBC administrators because this was in line with their own broad definition of education, which took into account the needs of individuals with a fondness for classical music as well as the more serious student taking a tutorial class.<sup>6</sup> Lambert came to the *Listener* from the BBC's Adult Education Section, a position for which he was particularly well-qualified, having been a full-time extramural tutor for the universities of Sheffield and London during the 1920s, Secretary of the Association of Tutorial Class Tutors, and editor of the official Workers' Educational Association (WEA) journal *The Highway*. He was also a member of

the General Committee of the British Institute of Adult Education, and while editor of the *Listener* he continued this direct involvement in adult education: dozens of internal memos throughout the 1930s show him asking the BBC for permission for outside activities such as tutoring and lectures. In the memoir Lambert published the year after he left the *Listener*, he confirmed that ‘my first allegiance was, and always will be, given to adult education’ and in the magazine’s first few years these priorities are clearly discernible, with several articles each week devoted to discussion of institutions such as the University Extension Movement and the WEA.<sup>7</sup> Yet as will be demonstrated through analysis of the magazine’s literary advice, the *Listener* was appealing to the general reader as well as the student, and the tone managed to remain informative without being overtly didactic.

In order to identify the *Listener*’s position in the periodical marketplace, it is useful to compare it with another publication of the period, Wilfred Whitten’s *John O’London’s Weekly (JOLW)*, launched in 1919 and also priced at twopence.<sup>8</sup> Both offered guidance on ‘what to read’ in terms of new books and how to navigate one’s way through the classics of English literature, together with a lively letters section in which readers were invited to respond to articles. However the tone and content of the *Listener* was pitched above that of *JOLW*, with the latter publication aimed squarely at the post-war ‘new reading public’; in urban areas these were likely to be shop or factory workers, housewives and low-level clerks, whose parents had been the beneficiaries of the 1870 Education Act and subsequent legislation. A typical *JOLW* issue from the early 1930s contained crossword competitions, a cartoon of world leaders, regular literary gossip column ‘What I Hear’, and an article advising on ‘Cheap Schemes for the Vacation’.<sup>9</sup> Most pages were also divided into short, snippet-type articles, with plenty of illustrations to break up the text. The *Listener*’s first issue on 16 January 1929, by comparison, reveals it to be a more serious-minded publication – indicative of that Reithian determination to educate the public up to higher standards of taste, rather than provide mere entertainment. The first two pages of articles were taken up by ‘Transferring the Unemployed Miner’, from a broadcast the previous week by leading mining engineer Sir John Cadman. The music section which followed comprised an article on choirs (‘Team-work in Music’ by prominent composer, organist and music professor Sir Walford Davies) and a page-long biographical overview of composer William Boyce. The first editorial then set out the mission statement of the magazine, highlighting its educational objectives: the *Listener* was to be a ‘substitute for, and an improvement on, a substantial proportion of the “Aids to Study” pamphlets which have been appearing regularly during the past few years’.<sup>10</sup> It continued, ‘We hope that in these pages, with their catholicity of interests

– studies, hobbies, recreations – everyone will find at least some congenial feature, and also some new means of extending and deepening the enjoyment of broadcast programmes'.<sup>11</sup> Sharing the same page, 'Links and Listeners' listed new wireless discussion groups in Maidstone and Sheffield. This preceded some miscellaneous articles ('The World in 1929' by H. Wilson Harris, 'India in Art and Literature', and a discussion of Edmund Burke by political theorist and liberal Marxist Harold Laski), before the 'Books and Authors' section, which included John Buchan writing on historical novels, and Geoffrey Whitworth's feature 'From Pantomime to Peter Pan', tracing the development of pantomime from sixteenth-century Italian theatre down to the present day. Among the featured titles in regular section 'The Listener's Book Chronicle' was a volume of essays by T. S. Eliot and some WEA-sponsored study outlines including *Drama* and *The Industrial Revolution*, and the article 'In a Children's Library' (by the librarian of Croydon Public Library) offered tips on encouraging children to read more. The 'New Novels' column, towards the end of the magazine, recommended Arnold Bennett's *Accident* – Mary Agnes Hamilton describing it as 'one of Mr. Bennett's most delightful fictions', whose 'verisimilitude' was 'overpowering'.<sup>12</sup> Finally the 'Broadcasting and Languages' section comprised articles in French and Italian, while 'The Listeners' Choice for Next Week' highlighted programmes deemed to be of particular interest to its readers; these were mainly on cultural topics – for instance 'Dramatic Criticism', 'The Classics in Translation', a play reading of *Henry IV, Part One*, 'Reading for Busy Women', 'Readings in Verse', and 'Foundations of Music'.

While it is difficult to say exactly who was buying the magazine on a weekly basis during its early years, features such as 'How to Live on £300 a Year' and 'The Black-Coated Brigade' (the latter describing the plight of unemployed clerks) suggest that regular readers were drawn mainly from the suburban middle classes. This assumption gathers strength when we consider the magazine's advertisement listings, which were aimed at an aspirational public: on 2 July 1930 they included new, low-cost Wimpey housing in Hounslow, a 'Secretarial College for Educated Girls' based in London, and membership of the 'Century Book Club', offering 'all new books direct by post on simple graduated payment terms' starting from 5 shillings.<sup>13</sup> The rising incomes offered by the clerical profession meant there was money to spend on books and other leisure activities, and more time, too, with working hours falling considerably during the 1930s. This important new readership was not, however, without its detractors: the term 'middlebrow' was coined in the 1920s to refer, derogatorily, to the cultural tastes particularly of white-collar suburbanites, derided as undiscerning and insecure, who read for entertainment and distrusted modernist innovation.

Recent scholarship on the term ‘middlebrow’ has confirmed its negative connotations: Nicola Humble has described it as a ‘dirty word’ used to describe ‘cultural products thought to be too easy, too insular, too smug’<sup>14</sup>; Erica Brown and Mary Grover argue that ‘its dismissive effect [was] designed to credit its users with superior powers of discrimination which would place them safely beyond identification with ... the dreaded middlebrow’.<sup>15</sup> The middlebrow reader was perceived as a ‘hapless aspirant, lacking in cultural confidence and reliant on the authority of his or her betters’.<sup>16</sup> The BBC was implicated at an early stage in the use of this term ‘middlebrow’: Virginia Woolf labelled the BBC the ‘Betwixt and Between Company’ and accused the Corporation of accommodating the safe, unvaried interests of a supposedly homogenous mass, when it would be preferable to ‘broadcast the fact that highbrows and lowbrows must band together’ to eradicate the middlebrow, the ‘bloodless and pernicious pest ... which is the bane of all thinking and living’.<sup>17</sup>

A more nuanced discussion of the *Listener*’s putative readership and the magazine’s own intellectual identity took place within its own pages in April 1930 – prompted, on the surface at least, by a reader writing in to lament that ‘Ninety per cent’ of the BBC and the *Listener* was ‘for the educated’ and therefore ‘far above most of our heads’.<sup>18</sup> This was taken up in the following week’s editorial, ‘Are Talks Too Highbrow?’, which asked that listeners allow the BBC more time to formulate ways of making talks entertaining as well as informative: ‘Only a few short years have passed since the first faltering attempts were made to use the medium at all’.<sup>19</sup> The discussion continued for several weeks, with a string of articles and letters attempting to establish the most constructive intellectual level for talks. Most striking here is the readiness on the part of the magazine to reflect on the progress of its educational mission: by opening the discussion up to readers it was encouraging them to consider how useful the BBC and the *Listener* were in providing them with the information and resources they felt they needed. The general consensus within the correspondence pages and in comments elsewhere throughout the *Listener* was that talks and articles were pitched at a level most found either too demanding or just within reach. A typical letter contained the following statement: ‘I personally would like to thank them [the BBC and the *Listener*], for their aid, to many a new point of view, which I should not have been able to have obtained but for their help’.<sup>20</sup> Far from being culturally unadventurous, complacent, or stolid, the sense being conveyed here is that the *Listener*’s readers were highly receptive to new ideas, and Jane Dowson’s seminal work on modernist poetry and the *Listener* demonstrates that the magazine was adept at providing them with the appropriate material; she identifies that during Janet Adam Smith’s tenure as deputy editor (and literary editor) between 1929 and 1935, the

magazine became a crucial conduit for the mass dissemination of avant-garde ideas.<sup>21</sup> Poetry, books and literature were usually allotted six pages out of the *Listener*'s average of fifty-one. Given that between six and ten of these pages were given over to advertising, this meant that literature-related content (reviews, serialisations, articles and poems) made up around fifteen percent of each issue. Yet Lambert was keen to make this a vibrant space, and Adam Smith proved to be an exceptionally dynamic force – she held responsibility for the literature and art pages, and set about commissioning an impressive array of new writers, particularly poets, for the magazine: early poems by W. H. Auden, Stephen Spender, C. Day Lewis, Kathleen Raine and Louis MacNeice were all published there in the early 1930s. As Dowson observes, 'The *Listener* registers which poets would have entered more kitchens or front rooms than through any other medium. With the wireless, it brought modernist principles and poetry to an audience who would otherwise have been ignorant of them and introduced the so-called Auden generation to a public fearful of leftwing politics'.<sup>22</sup> The appointment of J. R. Ackerley as Adam Smith's successor in 1935 continued this trend; he was an ideal choice for the role – a published poet and assistant producer for BBC Talks, he was also extraordinarily well-connected in literary circles and like Adam Smith before him, signed up a remarkable selection of contributors that included Herbert Read, Eric Linklater, Vita Sackville-West, L. P. Hartley, J. B. Squire, E. M. Forster, W. E. Williams, Edwin Muir and Christopher Isherwood. As that sample of names suggests, and as Dowson also makes clear, the nature of the *Listener* was such that avant-garde writers appeared alongside much less radical authors and critics; it is this combination of what Dowson terms 'tradition and experiment' which has made the magazine so difficult to categorise.<sup>23</sup> A poem by Auden might be printed adjacent to one by Robert Bridges, and a hugely controversial series on modernism by Harold Nicolson was followed the next month by a series from the anti-modernist critic J. C. Squire, in the course of which it did not seem out of place for him to devote several hundred words to a favourable discussion of *Charley's Aunt* – a popular Victorian-era farce. This might appear in the same section as instructive articles designed to alleviate cultural anxieties – advice for budding authors on how to publish one's own material, and where to find the best bargains in second-hand books.

Having considered the *Listener*'s complex and dynamic intellectual identity, the remainder of this article will trace how this diversity of interest functioned in educational terms: what advice and encouragement was offered to those aspirational readers wishing to branch out and start reading a broader range of material? What reassurance was provided for those who found themselves struggling either with canonical works or with more avant-garde

developments, or both? And how reasonable is it to regard the 1930s *Listener* in pedagogical terms – that is, as an important and influential cultural manual? The *Listener*'s book review pages provide a useful starting point: although at times the column was dominated by mainstream novelists – Michael Sadleir's article in October 1930, for instance, included John Galsworthy's *On Forsyte Change*, Arnold Bennett's *Imperial Palace*, *Cakes and Ale* by Somerset Maugham, and novels by Graham Greene, Anne Allardice and popular historical novelist George Preedy – this regular section also encouraged readers to branch out and try less accessible writers. Vita Sackville-West was commissioned as the BBC's fortnightly novel critic by her then lover, BBC Talks Director Hilda Matheson, in 1928, and her broadcasts were regularly printed in the *Listener*. The news that Thomas Mann had won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1929 prompted Sackville-West to offer some tips for those wishing to begin reading his oeuvre, but she frames Mann's fiction within familiar cultural touchstones – readers with 'leisure at their disposal' were urged to try *Buddenbrooks* (the Martin Secker two-volume edition, priced 7s. 6d. per volume) which she claimed has 'frequently been compared' with *The Forsyte Saga*, although 'the difference lies in the far greater delicacy of the German author's art'.<sup>24</sup> Those preferring 'a little story which can be read in half an hour' were urged to try *Early Sorrow* (the 5s. Secker edition), 'a slight, but charming, example of the delicacy of Thomas Mann's writing'.<sup>25</sup> In the same article Sackville-West recommended Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, 'certainly one of the finest novels of the year', as well as novels by Henry Williamson and E. F. Benson.<sup>26</sup>

More directed literary advice came from the writer and socialist political activist Margaret Cole, who regularly offered tips to the aspirant reader. In 'Good and Bad Verse: How to Become a Judge of Poetry', which was commissioned specially for the *Listener*, Cole acknowledged that 'you will soon come to a poem which is by a "good" author, but which you do not like at all', but since 'most good poets wrote appallingly bad poems', simply 'Try another'.<sup>27</sup> If the appeal of that particular author still remained unclear, Cole advised finding a critical work on them, or talking to a friend who does like their writing in order to ascertain exactly why. Even if this failed to alter one's own view of the author, it was likely to shed light on the qualities that had rendered them canonical: 'you will, after a while, be able to lay your mind alongside of his, and be able to see why Wordsworth, Blake and Whitman (to name the three most frequent stumbling-blocks) were great poets, even if, at the end of it, you come back to saying that, as far as your own personal preference is concerned, you would give the whole of what Wordsworth wrote for one canto of *The Ancient Mariner*'.<sup>28</sup> Cole's advice here was conveyed in an amiable, no-nonsense tone very much reminiscent of Arnold



Bennett's literary advice column in Edwardian newspaper *T. P.'s Weekly*, which was guided by similar principles – there Bennett had offered tips for deriving as much as enjoyment as possible from one's reading, just as Cole's emphasis here was on 'enlarging the area of one's appreciation', so that one could then take 'real pleasure' from 'forty poems instead of four'.<sup>29</sup> Cole's ongoing commitment to the democratisation of the literary field can be evinced throughout her dozens of contributions to the magazine – in 'A Petition to Scientists' in April 1930, for instance, she called on scientists to use 'non-technical' language 'without reading as though it were meant for the feeble-minded',<sup>30</sup> and her review of *Mathematics for the Million: How to Master the Magic of Numbers* (Lancelot Hogben's primer aimed at autodidacts) in October 1936 praised the book for being cheap and presented in a lucid style.

Cole was just one of dozens of writers and critics offering advice to readers keen to extend their cultural know-how; J. C. Squire's 'The Enjoyment of Literary Forms' series, originally broadcasts but reproduced in the *Listener* from January 1931, included weekly articles focused on 'The Novel', 'Weighing up the Critics' and 'How to Appreciate Poetry'. Like Cole, Squire was a good fit for the magazine: though now a largely forgotten figure, he was a prominent political journalist, poet and literary editor, and had established the influential *London Mercury* in 1919. He also worked as a regular reviewer for the *Observer* throughout the 1920s, where he displayed a distinctly anti-modernist taste, recommending novels based on readability above all else. Throughout his regular appearances in the *Listener* (some of them adapted from broadcasts, but many as specially commissioned articles), Squire adopted a plain-speaking register, refusing to capitulate to the latest critical fads: his advice for reading poetry, for instance, was to choose poems based on personal preference, and not be concerned with categorising them into 'movements and schools'.<sup>31</sup> Rather than be distracted by critical concepts, Squire's primary emphasis was on highlighting the passionate response provoked by simple verse. Yet he also suggested that there was 'intellectual fun' to be gained from examining a poem such as Tennyson's 'Break, Break, Break', and attempted to illustrate this with a brief close reading: 'The "break, break" is like the ticking of a clock, the sea's clock: and, feeling it rather than thinking of it, the mere sound reminds us of the inexorable passages of time which takes all hands away from us and still all voices'.<sup>32</sup> The tone of these quasi-didactic articles was very difficult to get right: although some pointed instruction was clearly useful, the magazine's readers were unlikely to respond well to the stern tones of a schoolteacher. Instead Squire light-heartedly reassured readers that very few people honestly enjoy 'everything from Chaucer to Spenser, from Spenser to Pope, from Pope to Calverley', and rather than pretend to like every canonical writer, the individual

might simply ‘take from poetry what he can’.<sup>33</sup> Squire was careful to foreground the gratification that literature could offer when one followed one’s own preferences, and he refused to insist that readers should aim for comprehensive coverage of the canon. In his article on ‘The Essay’, in the same series, he offered tips for reading Lamb, Hazlitt and Bacon, quoting in admiration some instances of Lamb’s ‘purely personal’ voice, the ‘Honesty and whimsicality and confidential buttonholing’ that ‘make people love Charles Lamb’.<sup>34</sup> Lamb was an apposite choice given his comparative readability and his penchant for humour, and it is not insignificant that he had also been the writer chosen by Arnold Bennett, over two decades earlier, when he had set out to introduce Edwardian readers to classic literature. As I have argued elsewhere, Bennett ‘took Charles Lamb as the prototype for a step-by-step guide that showed readers how they could overcome misgivings that certain writers were in some way “beyond” them’.<sup>35</sup> Similar objectives were on display in Squire’s column, where he began by noting that ‘The word “Essay” is an intimidating one to the vast majority of the British population’ before placing himself among their number by admitting that ‘It has, by the same token, painful associations for me’.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless he encouraged readers to forget their experience of ‘school essays’ and the ‘painstaking dullnesses’ of ‘scientific, religious, political and economic essays’ such as Malthus’s ‘Essay on Population’.<sup>37</sup> Instead he advised readers that ‘the more personality we get the better’ and that the ‘typical English essayist is an attractive and charming person who gives us conversation ... such as we might have at an ideal dinner-table, only polished and refined as verbal conversation never can be’.<sup>38</sup> For contemporary examples Squire advised turning to popular causerie-style essayists such as E. V. Lucas, G. K. Chesterton, Hilaire Belloc and Robert Lynd, each of whom retained their ‘freshness, their humour, their sense of beauty, and their capacity for exposing themselves as specimens of mankind’ while writing for the mainstream press.<sup>39</sup>

For readers who (despite advice and reassurance from critics such as Cole and Squire) remained discouraged by their inability to enjoy less accessible, ‘classic’ texts, further support was on hand: the series ‘Classics I Can’t Read’, which was specially commissioned for the *Listener* and appeared in September 1937, featured a different writer each week outlining their own struggles with the canon. The message to be deduced from this set of articles was that there was no need to be ashamed about not particularly enjoying some of the more famous works of literature; in fact adopting a blasé attitude towards certain aspects of high culture marked one out as an urbane individual who was undisturbed by the disapproval of more self-conscious cultural arbiters. Robert Lynd opened the series by admitting that ‘there are a number of masterpieces of English and foreign literature that I cannot read with

any continuous interest', and suggested to readers that 'If so bookish a man as Lamb, with an incomparably fine taste in literature, could find nothing to please his palate in the ironical flavours of Gibbon, the rest of us need not be cast down because we find this or that masterpiece deadly dull'.<sup>40</sup> Novelist Rose Macaulay continued the series the following week by enthusiastically admitting that she could never read Cervantes, Aphra Behn, Otway, Rabelais, Carlyle, Richardson ('Mr. Lynd says he always breaks down in his efforts to read Richardson; I make none'), Surtees, Burns, Wordsworth, most of Southey, Cowper, Scott, most of Zola, George Sand, and the Count de Sade.<sup>41</sup> These, she explained, represented just a sample of the authors she could list, and rather be ashamed by her own lack of effort, she delighted in it: 'Here is a London Library catalogue. Am I trying to imply that I habitually read, either for pleasure or for any other reason, all the famous works listed here except those which I am now excluding? Heaven forbid. Heaven preserve me from such industry, or from such lying'.<sup>42</sup> Hugh Walpole, the following week, was equally unapologetic: Stendhal he found 'dry, antiseptic, prodigiously unsentimental'; Peacock is 'dreadfully over-rated'; George Meredith's 'unpopularity' is both 'undoubted and deserved'; and *Daniel Deronda*, is 'of course, unreadable'.<sup>43</sup> This short series of articles was clearly designed to be an amusing and refreshing look at the canon, but it was also aimed at anxious readers who felt obliged to feign their enjoyment of classic texts. The message here was simple and reassuring: abandon this reverence for the so-called masterpieces; be honest about your literary preferences, and read instead for pleasure.

The advice offered by Squire in 'The Enjoyment of Literary Forms' series underlined his aversion to modernist experimentation. Reith, too, was openly hostile to the perceived immorality of writers such as Woolf, Joyce and D. H. Lawrence, and the *Listener's* editors, who were much more responsive to avant-garde literature, came up against the Director-General on various occasions – most notably in 1933, when Adam Smith was asked by Reith to defend the selection of modernist poets she had chosen to print.<sup>44</sup> Harold Nicolson's broadcast series 'The New Spirit in Modern Literature', commissioned by Hilda Matheson two years earlier, had proved even more contentious. Todd Avery is correct to suggest that Nicolson's series 'announced the arrival of a new spirit within the precincts of the new Broadcasting House', one which was 'opposed to Reithianism'.<sup>45</sup> It is not therefore surprising that Reith vehemently opposed this twelve-week series, which promised to offer in-depth and largely affirmative discussion of modernist writers. Although Nicolson was eventually allowed to go ahead and broadcast, the row led to Matheson's resignation and exposed some of the deep ideological tensions running through the BBC at this time, with culturally

progressive producers repeatedly coming up against the broadcasting ethics of a determinedly conservative administration. Yet what tends to be overlooked in critical discussions of Nicolson's controversial series is its educational function – particularly when it appeared in printed form. The series was published week by week in the *Listener* between September and December 1931, and there it had a significant pedagogical impact, functioning as a syllabus for readers interested in studying modernist literature. To take one example: in the week on Woolf (week seven) Nicolson advised starting with *The Common Reader*, then 'The Mark on the Wall' and 'A Room of One's Own', by which stage 'you will be prepared for the novels': *Orlando*, *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*.<sup>46</sup> He also suggested what to look out for in each of these works: 'You will find towards the middle of the book a passage where Mrs. Dalloway walks across the Green Park and sees the sun catching the yellows and reds on the Piccadilly 'buses. Read that passage carefully. It is one of the most characteristic things that Mrs. Woolf has ever written. It is the essence of her style'.<sup>47</sup> Readers of the *Listener* (unlike those only hearing this over the wireless) would have been able to refer back to this article as they made their way through the books Nicolson suggested. The printed version of Nicolson's talks therefore functioned as a set of tutorials on modernist literature – a claim further underlined by the fact that the series was also published in 1931 as a pamphlet (priced at four pence) to be used as a study aid alongside the broadcasts. In Nicolson's introduction to this pamphlet he described what he termed his 'bull's-eye' readership, and this tallies with the putative reader of the *Listener*: 'I imagine a person anxious to grasp the spirit of his age, prepared for this purpose to undertake what is known as "difficult" reading, and sufficiently interested in the subject to welcome some measure of guidance and suggestion'.<sup>48</sup> This pamphlet, published as part of the BBC's 'Changing World' series,<sup>49</sup> was sufficiently popular for the initial print run of 12,500 copies to be extended.<sup>50</sup>

It is not difficult to imagine why the series was so popular among extramural students: Nicolson promised to make sense of the most difficult literature of that period, and this was clearly an attractive proposition. He offered himself up as an 'interpreter' who would bridge the gap between ordinary readers and the 'band of [modernist] pioneers' who so far have 'been at no pains to explain to the great public either their methods or their intentions'.<sup>51</sup> As with Squire, Nicolson shied away from adopting a 'didactic or pontifical' tone, and refused to embroil himself in debates as to quality – whether, for example, Galsworthy was better or worse than Joyce – but simply to look at those authors, chiefly modernists, whom he felt were likely to epitomise the post-World War One mindset in years to come.<sup>52</sup> Like Cole, Nicolson chose to draw connections between modernist authors and those with whom readers would

have been more familiar: in week three, for instance, he highlighted certain similarities between T. S. Eliot and Tennyson, identifying both as ‘mystics and pessimists, sensuous and fastidious, melancholy and virile, intellectual and black-blooded’.<sup>53</sup> But he was also quick to acknowledge that novels like *The Waves* and *Ulysses* (the second of which Reith had banned him from mentioning by name) might be considered intimidating prospects, and while he commended Joyce’s ability to represent the ‘digestive processes’ taking place in the individual subconscious, he also showed himself to be on a par with many of his readers by admitting that at times Joyce ‘becomes almost overpoweringly difficult to read, and, as such, almost overpoweringly dull’.<sup>54</sup> At this point Nicolson urged readers to give up trying to understand Joyce’s writing, and instead ‘abandon yourself to receptivity ... you must expect only to absorb a new atmosphere, almost a new climate’.<sup>55</sup> The majority of correspondents in the *Listener* came out in support of the series, one letter commending Nicolson for ‘explain[ing] lucidly their [modernist writers] point of view to us’,<sup>56</sup> and another for refusing to read literature ‘at one or two generations remove ... The very fact that they are closer to us makes it easier for us average ones to grasp the message of our contemporaries than that of those whose viewpoint was necessarily different’ and (perhaps in acknowledgement of the BBC’s new policy banning discussion of new novels) ‘it is a sign of unhealthy sentimentality when we assess values in proportion to their distance from us’.<sup>57</sup>

This type of response was typical: each week the *Listener*’s correspondence pages contained a fairly even spread of letters on art, science, history, music and literature, yet readers were regularly drawn into debates about books and reading. Literature-related letters might be prompted by a talk or article from the previous week, while some contributors, like Cole, Sackville-West and also Stephen Spender, sometimes responded to readers’ letters about their articles, and these too were often printed, opening up a dialogue between author and reader about the issues raised. In the early years, when the magazine’s tone felt more educational than it would in later issues, this weekly ‘Points from Letters’ section was also used to report successes in group listening, or simply to notify readers about a new discussion group based around a series of BBC talks. Yet the letters page could also be a space for more provocative discussion of reading patterns and literary education: the prominent adult educationalist W. E. Williams regularly used it to garner public opinion on issues germane to readers – in January 1937, for instance, he asked for their views on turning the Crystal Palace site into a large-scale educational centre.<sup>58</sup> Meanwhile a September 1937 editorial calling for the extension of opening hours of the British Museum Reading Room to benefit part-time students triggered a warm and supportive response from the adult education community, with

letters from Ernest Green (General Secretary of the WEA), James Sutherland (head of English at Birkbeck), Guy Parsloe (from the Institute of Historical Research) and J. Ewart Stewart (of the Borough of Acton Education Committee). In February 1936 Herbert Read, another frequent correspondent and regular contributor, used the letters page to call for the establishment of a 'League of Readers' willing to pay a guinea a year for books 'whose value is determined, not by the competitive standards of mass-production, but by those of style, content and permanent work' – thereby protecting literary standards against the profit-driven motives of large publishing firms.<sup>59</sup> The letter provoked numerous responses, with Edwin Muir (at this stage the *Listener's* fiction reviewer) declaring himself similarly alarmed at the 'desperate' state of good literature, whereby 'the writers who represent literature to the public are not the best but only the second-best', and therefore fully supported Read's idea.<sup>60</sup> Given its reputation for promoting adult education, for introducing progressive ideas into the mainstream, and for keeping readers abreast of current issues in educational policy, the *Listener* was an ideal forum for discussions of this type.

Adult education became deprioritised within BBC schedules during the 1930s: Roger Fieldhouse notes that 'In 1933-4, the Listening Groups project faltered, and the optimism generated by their early rapid growth faded' – so much so that 'From the mid-thirties adult education listeners were treated as an element within the general audience, and it was the main audience's educational needs that prevailed'.<sup>61</sup> The time allocated to adult education programmes was therefore cut, the assumption being that other, more established endeavours such as the WEA and the University Extension Movement were better placed to provide structured and systematic courses for adult students. This was symptomatic of a widespread trend within educational structures during the interwar period, with many less established initiatives relying more and more heavily on organisations such as the WEA to help them carry out their work. Real educational reform would have to wait until after the Second World War: Thomas Kelly has identified that the number of university students rose from 52,000 to 185,000 between 1945-46 and 1966-67, with 'full-time and sandwich course students in other forms of education' in the same period increasing more than fivefold, from 54,000 to 273,000.<sup>62</sup> This was due in part to the 1944 Education Act, with the number of students rising even more dramatically after the Robbins Report of 1963. With these developments still around the corner during the 1930s, less formal means of delivering culture to the masses flourished: BBC programmers continued to invite leading intellectuals to speak about their areas of expertise; public library provision improved and expanded; the Left Book Club was established 1936, with more than 40,000 members joining within a year;

and Penguin books was launched in 1935, followed by the more educational Pelican series in 1937. The *Listener* – an informative, accessible, and dynamic cultural magazine – was another crucial conduit for disseminating intellectual ideas to an aspirational 1930s public, for whom more tangible educational reform was still around the corner.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Debra Rae Cohen, 'Intermediality and the Problem of the Listener', *Modernist/Modernity*, 19:3 (2012), 573-4.

<sup>2</sup> As Debra Rae Cohen has explained, R. S. Lambert, the first editor, was engaged in a long-running dispute with Talks Director Hilda Matheson about which programmes should be reproduced in print, and in what form. Rae Cohen's article is a major attempt to redress the lack of scholarly interest in the *Listener*, and is useful for understanding the considerable efforts that were made to underscore the magazine's educational and journalistic value without at the same time casting doubt on the pre-eminence of radio. She suggests that the *Listener*'s semi-autonomous status is largely to blame for its critical neglect: 'Neither a "Hansard for Talks" (a phrase commonly bruited in BBC memoranda as the journal was being planned) nor a freely commissioning magazine, neither a house organ in the centripetal sense nor an independent periodical, it has been elided in radio and print scholarship in ways that belie its significance for both'. Debra Rae Cohen, 'Intermediality and the Problem of the Listener', 570.

<sup>3</sup> An internal memo suggests that the magazine made a loss of £7,649 in its first year, and the average annual loss in the pre-war years was £4,752 – although this went as high as £9,311 in 1939, when the BBC took over the production and distribution from George Newnes. (BBC Written Archives Centre, London (hereafter WAC), R43/67. Memo and list of figures by G. S. Strode, 'Confidential note "The Listener"', G.97/53). The *Listener* began making a profit from 1941, when the sales rose to double its pre-war figure, but went back to making a loss in 1947, after paper costs increased.

<sup>4</sup> Hadow Committee, *New Ventures in Broadcasting* (London, 1928), p. 50.

<sup>5</sup> WAC, L1/667/1 Ackerley, Joseph Randolph. Memo by B. N. Nicolls, 'Notes on Information Branch Meeting', 7 February 1929.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* The *Spectator* at this time was in reality a very different publication, containing longer reviews and articles, and with the focus much more on news, politics and finance. There were almost no illustrations, and the few advertisements were aimed at an affluent readership – holidays to North America and the Mediterranean, cars and investment funds.

<sup>7</sup> Richard S. Lambert, *Ariel and All His Quality* (London, 1940), p. 188

<sup>8</sup> The cover price for the *Listener* went up to threepence in 1930.

<sup>9</sup> These articles appeared in the issue from 25 June 1932.

<sup>10</sup> 'A New "Venture"' *Listener*, 1:1 (16 January 1929), 14.



- 
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.
- <sup>12</sup> Mary Agnes Hamilton, 'New Novels', *Listener*, 1:1 (16 January 1929), 33.
- <sup>13</sup> 'Century Book Club', *Listener*, 4:77 (2 July 1930), 3.
- <sup>14</sup> Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity, and Bohemianism* (Oxford, 2004), p. 1.
- <sup>15</sup> Erica Brown and Mary Grover, 'Introduction: Middlebrow Matters' in Brown and Grover, (eds), *Middlebrow Literary Cultures* (Basingstoke, 2011), p. 2.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4
- <sup>17</sup> Virginia Woolf, 'Middlebrow' in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (London, 1942), p. 118.
- <sup>18</sup> R. Lacey, 'Are Talks Too Highbrow?', *Listener*, 3:66 (16 April 1930), 702.
- <sup>19</sup> 'Are Talks Too Highbrow?', *Listener*, 3:67 (23 April 1930), 716.
- <sup>20</sup> A. J. Sturmey, 'Are Talks Too Highbrow?', *Listener*, 3:68 (30 April 1930), 782.
- <sup>21</sup> Jane Dowson, 'Poetry and the *Listener*: the Myth of the "Middlebrow"', *Working Papers on the Web*, 6 (June 2003).
- <sup>22</sup> Jane Dowson, 'Poetry and the *Listener*', 3.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.
- <sup>24</sup> Vita Sackville-West, 'New Novels', *Listener*, 2:47 (4 December 1929), 761.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 761.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 761.
- <sup>27</sup> Margaret Cole, 'Good and Bad Verse: How to Become a Judge of Poetry', *Listener*, 3:54 (22 January 1930), 157.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 157
- <sup>30</sup> Margaret Cole, 'A Petition to Scientists', *Listener*, 3:64 (2 April 1930), 602.
- <sup>31</sup> J. C. Squire, 'How to Appreciate Poetry', *Listener*, 5:104 (7 January 1931), 25.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.
- <sup>34</sup> J. C. Squire, 'The Essay', *Listener*, 5:105 (14 January 1931), 67.
- <sup>35</sup> Alexandra Lawrie, *The Beginnings of University English: Extramural Instruction, 1885-1910* (Basingstoke, 2014), p. 138
- <sup>36</sup> Squire, 'Essay', 67
- <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

---

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>40</sup> Robert Lynd, 'Classics I Can't Read', *Listener*, 18:451 (1 September 1937), 464.

<sup>41</sup> Rose Macaulay, 'Classics I Can't Read', *Listener*, 18:452 (8 September 1937), 520.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 520.

<sup>43</sup> Hugh Walpole, 'Classics I Can't Read', *Listener*, 18:454 (22 September 1937), 630. One reader, Ronald G. Reynolds from Stroud, wrote in to say that he was in 'hearty agreement' with Walpole on Meredith, but with the exception of the novel *Evan Harrington*, 'one of the most glorious comedies in our language' which also managed to be so full of 'palpitating moments' that 'if the controllers of our twopenny libraries knew of it, they would probably take measures to have it brought out in a cheap edition for the delectation of their thriller-fans'. Ronald G. Reynolds, 'Classics I Can't Read', *Listener*, 18:456 (6 October 1937), 743.

<sup>44</sup> Jane Dowson has offered an in-depth discussion of this incident. Jane Dowson, 'Poetry and the *Listener*', 4. Dowson's article more generally provides an astute analysis of the ways in which 'Progressives within the BBC' clashed with 'reactionary elements inside and outside the institution'. Jane Dowson, 'Poetry and the *Listener*', 3.

<sup>45</sup> Todd Avery, *Radio Modernism: Literature Ethics, and the BBC, 1922-1938* (Aldershot, 2006), p. 41.

<sup>46</sup> Harold Nicolson, 'The Writing of Virginia Woolf', *Listener*, 6:149 (18 November 1931), 864.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 864.

<sup>48</sup> Harold Nicolson, *The New Spirit in Literature* (London, 1931), p. 4.

<sup>49</sup> Others titles in the series included *The Modern State* by John A. Hobson, *Science in Perspective* by Professor H. Levy, and *Education and Leisure* by Professor John MacMurray. The pamphlets were designed to supplement the Listening Group Activities arranged by the BBC's adult education section, whereby students gathered together to listen to evening lectures that had been arranged into a syllabus, and a group leader then provoked discussion of issues relating to the broadcast.

<sup>50</sup> WAC, R14/124, Central Council for Broadcast Adult Education: Programmes and Publications Sub-Committee Papers 1928-1934. Memo, 'Memorandum Submitted to Programme Sub-Committee on Circulation of Talks and Pamphlets, Session 1931-32'.

<sup>51</sup> Harold Nicolson, 'The Approach to the Intellectuals', *Listener*, 6:142 (30 September 1931), 545.

---

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 545.

<sup>53</sup> Harold Nicolson, 'Are Modern Writers Selfish?', *Listener*, 6:145 (21 October 1931), 684.

<sup>54</sup> Harold Nicolson, 'The Significance of James Joyce', *Listener*, 6:153 (16 December 1931), 1062.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 1062.

<sup>56</sup> Margaret Sissison, 'Mr. Nicolson and His Critics', *Listener*, 6:152 (9 December 1931), 1020.

<sup>57</sup> Owen P. D. Williams, 'Mr. Nicolson and His Critics', *Listener*, 6:155 (30 December 1931), 1159.

<sup>58</sup> W. E. Williams, 'Crystal Palace Site – Why Not for Education?' *Listener*, 17:418 (13 January 1937), 85.

<sup>59</sup> Herbert Read, 'Wanted – A League of Readers', *Listener*, 15:370 (12 February 1936), 317.

<sup>60</sup> Edwin Muir, 'Wanted – A League of Readers', *Listener*, 15:372 (26 February 1936), 410.

<sup>61</sup> Roger Fieldhouse, *The History of Modern British Adult Education* (Leicester, 2001), pp. 360, 361.

<sup>62</sup> Thomas Kelly has identified that the number of university students rose from 52,000 to 185,000 between 1945-46 and 1966-67, while the number of 'full-time and sandwich course students in other forms of education' in the same period increased more than fivefold, from 54,000 to 273,000. This was due in part to the 1944 Education Act, with the number of students rising even more dramatically after the Robbins Report of 1963. Thomas Kelly, *A History of Adult Education in Great Britain* (Liverpool, 1992), p. 334.